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## HOW TO TEACH A MASTERPIECE.

It seems inevitable, in answering the question, "How shall one teach a masterpiece?" to revert to the no less difficult question, "Why do we try to teach it?" Both, like a problem that perplexed Chaucer, have been disputed by "an hundred thousand men." All that I shall attempt to do is to define my own position, as it is at present, and so establish a point of departure for the discussion which is to follow.

Why do I feel justified in making my classes study Shakspeare's *Macbeth*, or Burke's *Conciliation*, or Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*? It is not merely that the books are "required." None of us, I trust, teach as we do in mere passive obedience, without the assurance of value in the work done. I feel that in the study of these masterpieces the student acquires or develops certain powers—certain abilities that make him capable of increased delight in life and of increased usefulness to those about him. These powers, I think, may be roughly classified into the following groups:

*First*, we must develop the ability to appreciate imaginative literature—to appreciate both the beauty of the pictures or the thoughts presented, and the adequacy of the expression in which these are embodied, the peculiar "thrill" of appreciation that constitutes the enjoyment of art. From this the pupil should derive a certain idealism of mood, a power to see, underlying and interpenetrating the so-called commonplace about him, the wonder that the poet sees there. We must, to put it in its crudest terms, *develop the æsthetic sense*.

*Secondly*, we must develop power to comprehend the literature of reason, to grasp precisely the author's proposition and restate it accurately. We must develop the pupil's *logical powers*.

We must develop, moreover, *mastery of the machinery of expression*. The pupil must acquire knowledge and control of the elements that convey thought. He must know the meanings and implications of words. He must know the great language of

literary reference and allusion. One might add—though this element falls partly in the group preceding—a knowledge of the structure of the sentence—less a knowledge than a sense, a sense based upon the study of formal grammar, but transcending and superseding it.

We must develop also *ability to read aloud*, doing justice to the author's logical meaning and to his emotional suggestion. This last I shall not consider here. I will omit also discussion of the value of literature in the teaching of composition. I will say only that I regard it, in this respect, as of the greatest value. "Imitation," says Bacon, "is a globe of precept;" a masterpiece is, then, an applied text-book of rhetoric.

I might add a *moral* object. I feel, however, that this should be rather pervasive than a thing by itself. A "moral lesson" considered in isolation is like "Sunday goodness." A teacher of moral force, teaching a poem permeated with moral earnestness, will inevitably develop the pupil's moral sense. Too many pupils—and teachers—come to regard a work of literary art as a nut, valuable only for its minute morsel of moral, worthless when once that is extracted. We must aim to teach our pupils more than this. We should aim to teach them to appreciate a masterpiece as we ourselves appreciate it, for the qualities for which we appreciate it, and to derive from study and appreciation the help—moral, imaginative, informative, and intellectual—that we have derived from it ourselves. How can we best accomplish this?

Different works will further different objects. The *Ancient Mariner* or *The Vision of Sir Launfal* will develop imaginative appreciation. Burke's *Conciliation*, on the other hand, will train, as will nothing else, the logical faculties. Between these extremes, these poles of the literary world, lie all the rest.

We are not called upon to consider the order of the study. A few leading principles might be noted, however, as affecting the objects sought and the methods followed. In the lower grades we should aim chiefly at developing imaginative appreciation. We must teach the pupil to like to read. He is then, having acquired a good steerage-way, ready for close—or, in

pedagogic diction, *intensive*—study. In the higher classes, students are more capable of study for the deliberate objects of knowledge and logical discipline. Generally, then, the logical element should increase from the entering grade upward. It does not follow that the development of imaginative appreciation should materially diminish.

To make the discussion more definite, I will here select a particular work—one which we all have taught and shall continue to teach—Shakspeare's *Macbeth*. How are these different objects to be developed in teaching it? What weight is to be given to each? In attempting to answer these questions, I shall incidentally speak of some of the other works studied.

While I am not to discuss oral training, I will call attention here to the fact that in the study of a play like *Macbeth* we must leave ample leisure for having it read aloud—at least in great part—by the students. This means that time must be deliberately allowed for this purpose, and a good deal of time. We must, consequently, allow a great many lessons to the study of this play, if the other objects of our teaching are to be accomplished. My impression—and I will try to emphasize it in what follows—is that our work is frequently too crowded, too hurried, for thorough training.

The student must not, whatever else is lost, be permitted to forget that *Macbeth* is a poem—a poem containing some of the noblest passages of English literature. This fact must be kept constantly before him. Much should be memorized. In fact, this should be made part of the student's everyday consciousness—to walk the world with him and transmute its commonplace. And to attain this end we need time; we must move slowly.

We find, moreover, in *Macbeth* a complex unity of structure that makes it a fit companion, in point of analysis, to Burke's *Conciliation*. Attention must be called to this continually. The whole play should first be studied as a whole; in two lessons, perhaps, the students submitting a careful outline of the action. The teacher may very fitly explain, as untechnically as possible, Freytag's theory of dramatic structure, and apply it to the play. He may ask his students to compare the general plan with the plan of plays previously studied.

This general view once established, the student must not be allowed to lose sight of it. In the more detailed study that follows, in every act, in every scene, I might almost say in every line, he must see the presence of the principal object. Why does Shakspeare make Macbeth say this? What unconscious irony in this innocent garrulity of Duncan? What crafty purpose underlies the polite solicitude of Macbeth? The relation of part to whole, the intricate unity of the complex mechanism, must be consciously perceived. Yet this *logical* aspect of the play must not be suffered to distract attention from its imaginative genius.

While the plan is in the play, the play was not deliberately constructed, like a modern steel building, around a previously articulated plan. There was in it the "creative flash," the clairvoyant impulse. It is not honest to teach our pupils that genius is merely another name for hard work. That well-meant lie should have had its day. One can no more create a work of genius out of uninspired diligence than one can create life in a chemical laboratory. It is only in fiction that we find science producing an "artificial man"—and Frankenstein is not said to have given entire satisfaction to his artificer. On the other hand, we must do away with the notion that genius can dispense with design, that great works of art are accomplished in a "wild-eyed" frenzy. Actual genius builds upon intellect. The artist is a dual personality, the man who is carried away by his imaginings, and the man who calmly—like Addison's angel—directs the whirlwind of emotion. We must try to make our pupils perceive both the impelling passion and the logical control.

In Burke, we may note, the emotional element, though present in a pervading richness of texture, and breaking out in resplendent patches, is less prominent. In studying the *Conciliation* I should lay almost the whole stress on the logical design and on a mastery of the means of expression. The class must see the object of each section of the speech, the object of each paragraph in each section, the object of every sentence in each paragraph. The topic-sentence of each paragraph should be written out and submitted. In *Macbeth* such a method would be

too formal. Some—and that point might well be discussed here—favor various graphic representations. It seems helpful, to me at least, to draw up a series of questions, combining a perception of purpose with a comprehension of character. Such questions build up, bit by bit, a sense of what a play is—how it differs from a novel or a lyric poem. I think that a student who has developed this sense will be less readily satisfied with cheap melodrama.

The analysis of the characters is of great value, not merely in connection with the plot, but in involving a more sympathetic study of the play. Personally I try to make clear to my class my own view of the characters, leaving individual members free to accept or reject it. They must know what it is. Beyond that I do not insist. Intelligent dissent is the best evidence of a live interest. I try by every means in my power to make the class see, as I see it, the imaginative selfishness of Macbeth, as absolute a selfishness as there is in all literature, contrasted with the unprincipled, misdirected unselfishness of Lady Macbeth. I contrast his emotional nature, finding relief in violent outbreaks, with her more restrained temperament, which prevents her finding any relief in expression of emotion, till her life pays the penalty.

Up to this point we probably agree. But when we enter upon matters of detail, opinions diverge. How thoroughly, in a book set for study, shall we take up details of language, allusion and grammatical construction? I do not believe—I want to state this most definitely—that we should attempt, unless we diminish the number of books studied, to make the student familiar with the fine points of Shakspearean philology. Exceptional pupils may be inspired to an exhaustive study, but to insist that all the class shall know all that is to be known concerning the play is to surrender all other objects to this one of thoroughness.

Of what value is this one? What does it accomplish? It shows the student precisely what Shakspeare means, it teaches him a little philology, and it trains him in painstaking diligence and accuracy. Moreover, it prepares him for entrance examinations. But cannot these advantages be overestimated? Can the pupils

learn precisely what Shakspeare means? We may approach this end; but, with their limitations, we can only approach it. To stop for continual explanation—unless we spend an unconscionable time upon the play—would defeat every other object; and even then, so intricate is the detail, much would be only half-comprehended, much learned only to be speedily forgotten. As for the training in Elizabethan philology, what we could give would be of a very superficial sort. Some *points* we can teach the class, but these are isolated, and each case should be most carefully considered. It is not for a high-school course to parallel the work of an advanced class in college. At Harvard, in one course, Shakspeare is studied from a point of view avowedly linguistic. A student elects that course understanding its object. That is all he expects to gain. We, however, aim, and rightly, to use Shakspeare as more than a basis for philological investigation. We must let many points go unexplained, or we shall lose the prospect of the whole wood in the investigation of the trees.

It is worth while, as I have said, to call attention to some significant changes of language. But our students should not be burdened with mere linguistic gossip. They hardly know the grammar of the twentieth century. Let us not needlessly bewilder them with the grammar of the seventeenth. The average high-school student may well satisfy his eye with the cover of Abbott's *Shakspearean Grammar*. I doubt even if it be worth his while to unravel the euphuistic intricacies of the speech of the stage "gentleman." Some speeches, the noblest, should be studied *in the minutest detail*. A number of difficult passages should be analyzed for the mental discipline. But that the whole poem, line by line, should be solved like a problem I altogether doubt. It seems to me wholly wrong, merely in order to "cram" a student for examination, to make him perfect in every portion, and to make him feel that "the best is like the worst," that the chief object of his study is "to know the notes."

Please notice exactly what I mean. I am not arguing against close study. I believe in it, and I require it—within limits. I do not, however, believe in the indiscriminate close study of the

whole work—not even should time permit. But time, as we have seen, does not permit. We must surrender something, or fall into a benumbing slavery to detail. Just as in composition we should suffer some errors to pass without a responsive application of red ink, so in our study of literature we must let some minor difficulties pass without comment; and I believe that we can do this without any evil result.

It will do less harm in Shakspeare than in Burke. Burke's appeal is directed chiefly to the understanding; exact comprehension is consequently indispensable. Shakspeare's appeal is chiefly to the imagination, and a lack of definite comprehension, or even a slight misapprehension, of his meaning does not seriously impair the impression. For the purposes of poetry, the halo, the penumbra of a word, counts for more than its defined disk. Take a series of words utterly without predication—"wind, blossoms, leaves, scent, brightness, birds, song"—one gets from it, especially in the mood that comes with March, a spring picture not utterly indefinite. In Milton's *Il Penseroso* there is a group of lines over which most editors spend at least a page of rather unenlightening notes:

And let some strange mysterious dream  
Wave at his wings, in airy stream  
Of lively portraiture displayed,  
Softly on my eyelids laid.

I do not feel at all sure—though I've taught this for some time—*just* what it means. If any do understand it, I am quite convinced that their interpretations differ. Yet, as I read the four lines, while they make no very lucid statement and defy analysis, they do call up before my mind a most charming picture, and a very clear one. I think I get from them the meaning Milton put into them. I know I get the mood and the music, and it was chiefly for these that he wrote them.

With regard to Shakspeare the same is true. The Elizabethan audience did not stop the play to debate on his meaning. His most difficult sentences are like nettles—one must snatch them boldly. Or, I might say, they are like barbed-wire fences or hawthorn hedges—easier to leap than to struggle through. When Mac-



beth uses the contemptuous term "the baby of a girl," he does not, I should say, intend any of the complex significations with which commentators have "darkened counsel." Take the difficulty at a gallop, and you soar over it. Macbeth merely combines the two *unmanliest* terms he can think of. Those familiar with the play will recall similar instances. Like our common expression, "spend no more than you can help," Shakspeare's sentences, analyzed, may give just the opposite of the meaning intended.

I advise, then, the plan presented above. Let us conduct the study on certain portions—those that most deserve it—with extreme minuteness. As to the rest, let us be contented with a knowledge less accurate. I apply this not only to Shakspeare, but to any writer set for close study. In Milton's minor poems, I should make a very close study of *L'Allegro*, *Il Penseroso*, and *Lycidas*. *Comus* I should take up more lightly. A close study of all I think impracticable. The value of the close study of each part should be tested by the ultimate object. Is it best for the class to learn the names of the nine Muses? What should they remember about Mūsæus, or Hermes Trismegistus? Let them learn what, for one end or another, will be of ultimate value. The rest can very well go.

What they learn, let them learn with associated interest. They should read the whole story of Orpheus and Eurydice, the whole story of Perseus and Andromeda. These are valuable additions to their knowledge and will be readily remembered.

I would suggest—it is an extreme I have not attempted—that one might take, say, the two poems *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*, and base upon them the work of an entire term. They would bring in a reading or a re-reading of the stories of classical mythology, a rapid reading of something from Sophocles, from Ben Jonson, from Chaucer, from Spenser. One could use in connection with them scenes from English rural life. The whole might be made varied, fascinating, and profitable. The rest of the minor poems—and some of *Paradise Lost*—could be read incidentally.

The chief objection offered to such an uneven study of the

books required is that the student will not pass his entrance examinations. That depends upon the examinations. I do not think that in the future examiners will expect too much. The list of required books is long—five in all. To study every line in each takes time. One could never be letter-perfect in all. Some book would always be in aphelion—at the wrong end of the orbit. Observe this fact: we do not—not any of us—remember all we ever learned. Even in the subjects we teach we forget, from year to year, essential detail. Yet we are surprised that our students forget, overlooking the possibility of applying to their case the priest's flattering figure, "if gold ruste, what schal yren doo?"

A college-entrance examination should, I think, test less the student's recollection of the meaning of certain selected passages than the ability he has acquired in his four-years' course. Such an examination is difficult to draw up, but, like some entrance examinations in geometry, consisting entirely of "original propositions," it should aim to ascertain what the applicant can *do*.

I once prepared a class of students in *Macbeth* so that they could explain almost any line. An unusually large proportion passed examinations for college and training school; yet, with regard to that particular class, I have a sense of uneasiness. They knew more than other classes that I have taught, but they could do less. I believe that ability should be esteemed highest and that examinations should indicate this estimate. The average student forgets within a year, as I have said, much—say, at least 50 per cent.—of what he has "crammed" from his notes. Let him learn fewer facts—facts carefully selected—each with its surrounding "aura" of interest, and learn these, as he would express it, "for keeps."

In two hours a week—about all we have to spend upon literature—one cannot cover all the ground thoroughly, at least not with so many works assigned. Of all that is put into the memory of our pupils, only a portion remains, and that is the portion that is assimilated with interest. Let us make that portion large, and select it with care. Let us try to live up to that "larger view" that we talk about in educational conferences.

Our theories are noble, but they need a closer acquaintance with our class-room practice. I mean myself to consider the preparation for examinations less as an end. I mean to try to follow the principles here laid down, even if my pupils fail. But I feel convinced that they will not fail; that by the time the teacher has perfected the ideal method, the worthy student, prepared by that method, will find that long-sought desideratum, the ideal entrance examination, ready to welcome him in.

HERBERT BATES.

MANUAL TRAINING HIGH SCHOOL,  
Brooklyn, N. Y.